

VIDEO

FAQ

Q What is a Windows Media Center Extender?

A A Media Center extender can stream media from a PC running Windows Media Center only. The extender replicates the Media Center interface, so you can browse files, watch live TV and schedule recordings as if you were using your PC directly. It's a big improvement over the simple playback-only interfaces of network media players.

The original extenders were never made available in Europe, they worked only with Windows XP Media Center Edition and didn't support PAL TV signals. A new range of extenders will be released this year, which will work with all versions of Media Center and are based around the new Windows Media Center Extender Technology (MCX Technology). For now, the only new extender you can buy is the Xbox 360 console, available from £190 including VAT.

Seth Barton

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CANON MD101

★★★★★

£190 inc VAT



We're seeing more and more camcorders that use hard disks and memory cards for video storage. For the budget-conscious, though, Mini-DV is still the best option.

Canon's 2006 range of budget camcorders won numerous awards in *Shopper*, including Best Video Product 2006 for the MV960, so we had very high expectations of the new MD101.

The MD101 looks very similar to last year's models, but Canon has made the rear of the camcorder blue. It adds nothing to the overall design; we think it's been changed simply to distinguish it from its predecessors. That said, the basic design is still an excellent one. The camcorder sits comfortably in the hand and all controls are placed in easy reach. A small joystick beneath the LCD screen controls playback and lets you navigate the settings menu. There's the usual range of options, including a variety of preset shooting modes, widescreen and electronic image stabilisation.

The LCD display is widescreen and this is the camcorder's default shooting mode. However, activating the image stabilisation means you lose some of the image's resolution because of the small CCD sensor. It makes it look a little like the image has been zoomed in.

Video quality is good for a budget camcorder, but we can't see any improvement from last year. There's little noise in well-lit conditions, and colours are bright and fairly true to life. In less ideal conditions, we noticed a lot of noise in the picture. There's a big 30x zoom lens for distant subjects, and a built-in sliding lens cover to help keep it in good condition.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Decent image quality
- ✓ Good battery life
- ✗ No USB port

HD CAMCORDER Mini-DV storage, 30x optical zoom, 1/4in 800,000 pixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, composite and phono output, FireWire interface
PART CODE 1881B007AA
SUPPLIER www.jessops.com
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 58)



The battery on the rear has only a 530mAh capacity, yet it lasted for an impressive 108 minutes in our continuous shooting test. If this isn't sufficient, you could buy a 1400mAh battery for around £31, which should last for around four hours. Unfortunately, no separate charger is provided, so you have to charge batteries using the camcorder. This is annoying, as you can't charge one battery while shooting with another.

The MD101 has a limited selection of ports. There's a FireWire port, so you can transfer footage to a PC for editing, but you can't copy it back to tape afterwards. No editing software is provided, so you'll have to buy some or use the simple Movie Maker application that comes with Windows. There's no USB port, so those without FireWire ports need to buy an expansion card for their PC. The AV-out supports only composite video, and not S-video. There is a microphone input, but no accessory shoe on which to mount an external microphone.

The MD101 is a decent budget camcorder with high video quality. The lack of a USB port is annoying, but at this price we can live without it. Alternatively, you could consider the slightly more expensive MD160, which has a USB port and a higher resolution CCD.

Seth Barton

Also consider...

SLINGMEDIA Slingbox

★★★★★

£150 inc VAT



The Slingbox allows you to watch television anywhere in the world, as if you were sitting in your own living room. It has SCART and S-video inputs, so you can plug in whichever set-top boxes you want. It's simple to use, and even includes onscreen mock-ups of your remote controls.

This is a great product that's essential if you can't live without your TV.



VIDEO-STREAMING DEVICE SCART and S-video inputs, Freeview tuner, IR transmitter, 10/100 Ethernet port
PART CODE SB150-110 SUPPLIER www.pcworld.co.uk
DETAILS www.slingmedia.com ✓ Works well with set-top boxes; easy to set up ✗ Can't timeshift Freeview FULL REVIEW Sep 2006

FREECOM DVB-T USB Stick

★★★★★

£23 inc VAT

This was the best digital USB tuner in our Labs test in *Shopper* October 2006. It's easy to get up and running and found all the expected Freeview TV and radio channels. Video quality from our rooftop aerial was very good. There's an excellent EPG, so it's easy to plan your viewing and schedule recordings. Sadly, the included mini remote can't control the EPG, having just basic buttons for changing the channel and volume.

Still, at £28 including VAT, you won't find a cheaper or simpler way of watching and recording Freeview TV on your computer.



USB DIGITAL TV TUNER USB Hi-Speed interface, RF input
PART CODE 25451 SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk
DETAILS www.freecom.com ✓ Good value; good EPG ✗ Poor remote control FULL REVIEW Oct 2006

BUFFALO LinkTheater Wireless-A&G

★★★★

£132 inc VAT

While many manufacturers try to make their network media receivers look like slick hi-fi components, Buffalo has made its latest LinkTheater indistinguishable from many wireless routers. This bland silver box would look more at home next to your telephone rather than your TV.

The front of the receiver has a standby button and a USB port, so you can plug in storage and access files directly. The rear has all the usual video outputs, including composite and S-video. However, you should opt for the RGB SCART socket, as it gives the clearest picture and carries stereo audio. If you want to connect to a hi-fi or surround-sound amplifier, there are stereo phono and optical S/PDIF outputs. There are no HD video outputs, so those with an HD TV must look elsewhere.

Two wireless antennas stick up from the rear of the unit. They're removable, so you can switch them for more powerful ones if you're getting a poor wireless signal. There's also an Ethernet port if you want to use a wired network. The LinkTheater found our wireless network when turned on, and we just had to enter our WPA-PSK key to get connected. It supports WPA-PSK and WEP encryption, so it should work with any home network. Without large HD files to worry about it, wireless performance was flawless in our tests.

The LinkTheater comes with its own server software, which works well and found all the media files on our test PC. You can also use Buffalo's LinkStation NAS to serve files



to the receiver without the need for a PC, as it has a built-in UPnP server. The LinkTheater is compatible with any UPnP server software and so will work with Microsoft's Media Connect, which is built into Windows Media Player 11.

The onscreen interface is clean and easy to navigate. It provides thumbnails where necessary, and these pop up instantaneously. Photos looked surprisingly good considering they'd been scaled down to the PAL resolution of 720x576. When selecting video clips there are a few seconds of buffering, but they then play smoothly. Video quality was fine, and we noticed no untoward artefacts during playback. The audio playback options are minimal, so you'll have to use your server software if you want to set up a playlist.

The LinkTheater is compatible with a wide range of media files, including MP3, JPEG and MPEG2. It'll also play h.264 MPEG4 files, so you can watch movies encoded with this efficient and widely used codec. However, the receiver won't play DRM-protected audio files.

The LinkTheater is a decent network media receiver. However, Philips' SLM550 (reviewed in *Shopper*, February 2007) costs just £20 more from www.dabs.com, is easier to use and has an HD video output, too.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple to set up
- ✓ Easy to use interface
- ✗ No HD support

MEDIA-STREAMING DEVICE USB, Ethernet and 802.11a/b/g interfaces, SCART, S-video, composite video, optical S/PDIF and phono stereo outputs
PART CODE PC-P4LWAG-1
SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>
DETAILS www.buffalotech.com

CHOOSING A... TV Card

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

INTERFACE: PCI
TUNES TO: Analogue
INPUTS: Radio frequency (RF)
CAPTURE FORMAT: N/A
HARDWARE COMPRESSION: No
Recommended minimum in grey

1 TV cards connect to PCs through a variety of interfaces. Internal cards fit into PCI or PCI-E x1 slots. Some double as graphics cards and use an AGP or PCI-E x16 slot. External devices with USB interfaces are easier to install, but use up a USB port. USB stick and PC Card versions are also available and are ideal for notebooks.

2 Most devices tune to either analogue or digital TV broadcasts from an external aerial, but hybrid devices can receive both types of broadcast. Terrestrial digital TV, or Freeview as it's commonly known in the UK, provides extra free channels, but you can't access subscription channels with a TV tuner card. Analogue broadcasts can give a superior picture to digital broadcasts, but digital tuners don't suffer from noise and ghosting when reception is poor – although they may cut out altogether. Check the digital reception in your area by going to www.freeview.co.uk and entering your postcode.

3 Basic devices provide an RF input for connecting an aerial. To connect an analogue video device, such as a camcorder or VCR for video editing, look for a composite or, preferably, S-video input. Digital tuners tend not to include this feature. Buy a hybrid device if you want to receive digital TV and capture analogue video.

4 If you want to use your PC for video editing or as a digital video recorder, you'll need to capture video in an appropriate compression format. The most practical format is MPEG2, which gives excellent quality and reasonable file sizes.

A PC with a 1GHz or faster processor can compress video to MPEG2 format in software, while slower machines need hardware compression on the card. Digital TV is broadcast in MPEG2 format, which makes recording to disk easy. Expect an hour of MPEG2 video to take up roughly 1.5GB of hard disk space.

5 Factor in any extras you want, such as an FM radio, a remote control and software for scheduled recordings and pausing live TV.

TERRATEC Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity

★★★★★

£79 inc VAT



This USB TV tuner uses diversity to take a signal from two tuners and aerials to improve reception in areas with weak signal strength. Alternatively, you can use the tuners independently to receive one programme while recording another.

The included software is easy to use, image quality is good, and the remote control is clearly labelled. It's the best dual tuner we've seen.

USB TV TUNER USB2 interface, dual digital tuners, 2x RF inputs
PART CODE 10456 SUPPLIER www.pixmania.co.uk DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net> ✓ Twin tuners with diversity; can schedule two recordings at once ✗ No timeline EPG FULL REVIEW Oct 2006



TOP UP TV TUTV Anytime DTR

★★★★★

£140 inc VAT



This hard disk Freeview recorder has twin tuners, so you can watch one programme while recording another. It has a 160GB hard disk, which is enough for more than 100 hours of recordings.

As well as the usual Freeview broadcasts, you can optionally receive additional Top Up TV programming downloaded overnight to the hard disk for £10 a month. It's a versatile and inexpensive way of improving your TV viewing.



HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, RF output, 2x SCART, S-video, composite, stereo phono and coaxial S/PDIF output SUPPLIER Top Up TV 08700 543210 DETAILS www.topuptv.com ✓ Subscription service ready ✗ Commitment to subscribe; awkward EPG FULL REVIEW Jul 2007